

The Amazons – source of sex equality?

KENNETH ROYCE MOORE *examines Plato's surprisingly modern attitudes towards women*

Plato's utopian society outlined in his *Laws* and called Magnesia is probably the most extraordinary example of civic and social planning to arise out of antiquity, albeit fictional. When compared with virtually all other actual *poleis* of its day, it is even more so on account of its inclusion of women in the public sphere. There are many revolutionary propositions in the *Laws* which include, but are not limited to, the likes of socialised education and healthcare, females in the military and potentially the government, a deliberately non-expansionistic and non-aggressive political doctrine along with a pronounced affinity for the vigilant supervision of all citizens, property and their interactions within its sovereign demesne. Each of these topics merits its own monograph. This article is concerned primarily with a significant innovation of Plato's Magnesia regarding his employment of a kind of 'national service' as part of the pedagogical experience of the young, known as the *ephēbeia* and its atypical inclusion of women.

Plato's reasons for this development are clearly founded in his philosophical precepts which are intended to produce the maximum net degree of justice and happiness in the populace and to instil a particular morality in them from an early age. The Magnesian *ephēbeia*, largely based on Spartan traditions, appears to have also had an impact on Athenian practices and represents a stage in the development of the state-run military as employed later by the Thebans, Macedonians, the Romans and, eventually, post-Hobbesian, post-Westphalian nation states. Plato's narrator, the Athenian Stranger, borrowing a theme in part from classical mythology, incorporates women into the equation of the *ephēbeia* and the military at large. This article examines these mythic connections and how Plato's *ephēbeia* fit into the cultural context of classical Greece as well as its potential influence on that context.

The *ephēbeia*

Plato was writing about an *ephēbeia* in the middle of the 4th century BC in the *Laws*. His theoretical propositions appear to connect with actual cultural traditions, but in ways that remain unclear. It is difficult to pinpoint the inception of this institution. Athenian youths in the later half of the 4th century certainly undertook a period of military training known as the *ephēbeia*. Hesk is critical of Vidal-Naquet's assertion that the *ephēbeia* existed in the 6th and 7th centuries; however, in the 5th century, as he says,

“this idea of an ‘in-between period’ involving institutionalised practices and associated stories that were anti-hoplitic gain credence when we think of the deceptive behaviour of young male characters in Attic Tragedy”.

There is, nonetheless, slim support for a 5th century *ephēbeia*. There is some evidence for the existence of the *ephēbeia* from about 371/0 BC onwards, but, according to Marrou,

“it did not receive its full form until much later, immediately after the defeat of Chaeronea (338), after a law for which Epikrates seems to have been responsible and which was passed between 337 and 335” during the reforms of Lycurgus of Athens.”

Did Epikrates' law instantiate the *ephēbeia* or merely modify a pre-existing institution? Reinmuth agrees with the 371/0 date for its existence but whether this represents the earliest instantiation of this institution remains uncertain. He proposes, in the light of the extant inscriptions, that the *archontes* to whom Aiskhines appealed as witnesses to his service (2, 167) as a frontier guard along with his fellow *sunephēboi* can be no other than the *kosmetes* and *sophronistes*, who were in charge of the boys in the *ephēbeia*, and that the existence of the same organization which is attested in 361/0 must be extrapolated to at least *circa* 371/0, some ten years earlier. Reinmuth also indicates that “one might with some justification propose the period after the Persian War” as the time of the *ephēbeia*'s inception – albeit in a less developed incarnation. Necessity appears to have been the mother of invention. But how formalised was the *ephēbeia* at this time?

Aiskhines the orator spoke of a system of training in which he partook as a youth, saying that he served for two years after his childhood as a “*peripolos* of this land”. He uses the word *sunephēboi*, describing his participation in this institution, in reference to himself and his age-mates. Perhaps, in this respect, Aiskhines was something of a pioneer. This term may or may not refer to the later *ephēbeia*. *Sunephēboi* may have been a voluntary body of youthful ‘territorial guards’, at a time when Athens could not afford to pay foreign soldiers, that later grew into a proper institution of the *polis*. “The *ephēbeia* was a programme of military training”, according to De Marcellus, “but authors of the early to mid-

fourth century state, both directly and implicitly, that such training does not exist". Isocrates, from whom we might expect some insight on this pedagogical matter, makes no mention of it. He says that his students acquired virtue, "having just emerged from boyhood", whilst most other youths waste time at drinking parties and in soft living. Plato's narrator in the *Laws* seems unaware of any such existing institution in Athens at that time. In Megillus' discussion of the Cretan *agelai* and the Spartan *agōgē*, which would seem to be the opportune moment to bring it up, there is no reference to any Athenian *ephēbeia*. This supports a later date for its official inception, but the issue remains controversial.

At some point, then, in the fourth century (at least after 371/0 and maybe even as late as 338/7), when a male youth attained the age of *meirakion*, he would lead a life apart for a period of time before gaining full admission into society. He might not be allowed the status of a full citizen until he had served his *ephēbeia*. As Vidal-Naquet indicates,

"Il faut dire maintenant un mot d'une autre institution, qui, à l'époque d'Aristote, joue un rôle essentiel dans l'admission tant à la vie civile qu'à la vie militaire".

Each year the demes drew up a list of eligible youths about to reach their civic majority (or 'manhood', *ephēbos* – generally 15 to 21), and then submitted it to the *Boulē* for approval. Aristotle tells us that an *ephēbe*

"cannot go to law either as a defendant or as a plaintiff, unless it is a matter of upholding an inheritance, arranging the affairs of an heiress, or a priesthood related to the clan".

The period of *ephēbeia* ended when one of several eventualities occurred. It could conclude with entry into the hoplite phalanx, the Athenian navy or marriage. Until the *ephēbeia* was over, a young man's relationship with the *polis* was equivocal. As a pedagogical institution, it certainly played a significant role: it appears to have been one of the few truly organised aspects of ancient Greek education outside of Sparta and it certainly reflected Lakonian traditions. The *ephēbeia* also incurred other, more unsavoury comparisons with Spartan practices.

The policy of mandatory military service in Plato's *Laws*, except for the potential inclusion of women, readily corresponds to the Athenian *ephēbeia*. The fact that a text of Plato's, composed in the 350s and early 340s, contains an outline for something like the *ephēbeia* is historically interesting. Although, as we have seen, there is evidence for *ephēbe*-style training in Athens as early as 371/0 (and possibly even earlier), it does not seem to exist as an official institution until Epikrates' law dated between 337 and 335, corresponding with the reforms of Lycurgus of Athens. The coincidence of Plato's writing and the inception of the *ephēbeia* suggests that these ideas were 'in the air' at this time.

Lycurgus was a powerful politician and reformer who was likely a student of both Plato and Isocrates. He was effectively the chief minister of finance for

Athens, after Plato's death, and he allocated considerable funds to the military and took a special interest in the formalisation of the *ephēbeia*. Renehan argues that Lycurgus "put his Platonism into practice in the field of *Realpolitik*" with results that would have pleased his teacher, in particular with a regard for ideas expressed in the *Laws*. Lycurgus' intentions for the *ephēbeia* also appear to have been philosophically inclined. While the institution did serve both military and educative ends,

"the names of the instructors, *cosmetes* (teacher of order) and *sophronistes* (teacher of self-control), show that Lycurgus' aim was rather the foundation of moral character".

As Jaeger has pointed out, "the same spirit that permeates the *Laws* was dominating Athens ten years after its publication, at the time of the Lycurgian reforms". The association with Lycurgus implies that, even if Epikrates' law only modified a pre-existing institution, Plato's propositions in the *Laws*, based on Cretan and Spartan customs, might have been highly influential. It is a tantalising suggestion but, for the present, there is a sufficient lack of direct evidence to say so with certainty.

The activities undertaken by youths during their *ephēbeia* amounted to a type of military education that also served as a process of socialisation and moral indoctrination. It was not dissimilar to the practice of mandatory military service in some nation-states of the modern era. Troops known as *peripoloi* existed in Athens during the Peloponnesian Wars but, as indicated above, it is unclear whether or not the *ephēbes* were amongst them at that time. In the fourth century, the *ephēbic peripoloi* would have undertaken their service in the forts surrounding Athens including the Panakton, Dekeleia and Rhamnous. Their role at these forts appears to have been mainly for the purposes of training or, potentially, as emergency backup in the event of an attack. Young men in their *ephēbeia* rarely entered into actual combat and then only under exceptional circumstances. After about two to three years of his *ephēbeia*, an Athenian youth stepped into his mature, civic role both as heir and citizen. This is in effect the same intention behind the *ephēbeia* described in Plato's *Laws*. The *ephēbe* system became "practically universal" throughout Hellenistic Greek cities. However, Athens eventually abandoned compulsory service for her own *ephēbeia* and other *poleis* maintained theirs on a voluntary basis only such that they became elitist institutions (akin to the English public school system of the past), contrary to the plan outlined in Plato.

Women in the Magnesian military

The deliberate inclusion of women in the public sphere of Magnesia stands in radical contrast to their accepted place in Athenian culture. The *Laws*, as Brisson says, was "proposing a reactionary adaptation of the Athenian legislation

of Plato's time". It is a heavily Lakonised adaptation but goes beyond the practices of the Spartans. There is nonetheless an unambiguous division of the sexes observable in the Magnesians armed forces. Elements of choice and compulsion apply in different ways to both men and women. Certain educational activities are to be compulsory for males but, to some degree, optional for females. It is a point of inequality that underlines Magnesia's basic ideology. Citizen males are to be sent to "the teachers of horsemanship, archery, javelin throwing and slinging" whether they particularly want to or not – and they will be encouraged from an early age that it is virtuous and manly to want to do so. Magnesian females are to learn all of the arts and sciences, just as their male counterparts. However they have a limited kind of choice in terms of their military training. It remains unclear as to whether or not Magnesian women will be allowed to take up higher offices within the *polis*. There is no reason, *prima facie*, to assume that they would not; however, as Santas rightly points out,

"Platon demeure silencieux sur l'éligibilité au Conseil des Gardiens des lois ou au Conseil Nocturne".

However, they are no less "*très estimables de la cite idéale*", in no small part due to their maternal role, and possibly treated on a more equal footing than women in the *Republic*.

The plan for Magnesian women's martial education is essentially a revised version of the same outlined in the *Republic*. However, the reformation of the family as the central unit of the second-best *polis* necessitates some critical adjustments. The line appears to have been drawn roughly around the age of the *ephēbeia* when young Magnesian men must perform their military service and women must begin considering the prospects of *teknopoia*, offspring production (760b). As Ernout puts it,

"...pour elles, la preparation militaire s'interrompt au moment de leur mariage".

Female citizens are to have the right to undertake a similar *ephēbeia* "if they are at all agreeable to it", but they are required to spend at least a whole decade of their lives in the act of bearing and rearing children before embarking on any potential military career. That option is open to them after having produced the requisite number of offspring. Plato's narrator, addressing his Cretan and Spartan interlocutors, says that:

"...the species of our human race naturally more secretive and cunning, the female sex, because it is weak, has been wrongly left behind in a state of disorder due to the misguided concessions of the legislator. But because of this neglect, many things are thoroughly absent from your institutions that could be considerably better than they are now, if women were thus administered under law. For not only is the disorganised supervision of women half the problem, as one might presume, indeed this female nature, as far as we're concerned, is inferior toward

the pursuit of virtue to that of the male sex, in this much it differs twofold.”

Such points as women’s perceived weakness, along with his clichéd statements of their ‘natural’ inferiority, seem contradictory to his plans for reforming them through training and education. This may be an indication of the persistence of traditional conceptions about gender manifesting in Plato. Perhaps he is being politic in an awareness of his audience’s likely prejudices. The Athenian Stranger’s solution to the problem that he has identified is innovative. He continues in the same passage, saying:

“And so, to take this matter up and amend it, the organisation of all...practices in common for both women and men is better for the... happiness of the state; but just now the race of humankind has, as it ...happens, not yet arrived at that point (780d9-781b6).”

The Athenian Stranger goes into great detail here (and also at 806e2-807a3 ff.) in developing a clearer picture of this major feature of Magnesian life. The situation of women’s neglect cannot be permitted to continue and the answer lies in education, physical training and proper socialisation. The latter, in a gendered revision of Cretan and Spartan traditions, will also entail common meals for women much along the same lines as for men.

The disparity between the compulsory military service of male Magnesians and the optional one for females is due to the fact that women are the ones who necessarily bear children. Since “the age limit of marriage for a girl is to be from 16 to 20 years of age” and for men 30 to 35 (752b2-9), it stands to reason that a Magnesian female might be getting married and starting a family at the same time as her male age-mates would be out learning the javelin and horsemanship. Despite the many degrees of equality extended to Magnesian women, the “products” of their labour, as Rosaldo says, “tend to be directed to the family and the home”. Since they will be prepared for their maternal role from an early age, one expects that the significance of *teknopoiia* will comprise a major portion of their socialisation. It defines many of the limits of their femininity and imposes implicit and explicit assumptions upon their sex. That is, their role in society will almost always be contingent on their maternal function. A major portion of a man’s idealised sex-role, in turn, stands in relation to this as the paternal counterpart. Slaves will rear their children, though, and, while their mothers will doubtlessly love them, Magnesian women will walk a different path than their Athenian counterparts, though they will no less form an essential “*corps civique*” within this imagined community.

Philosophy adapts *mythos*

Ancient Greek women’s participation in the public sphere could be described as limited at best. Plato’s utopian vision, however ‘second-best’, demands a greater degree of equality and this entails some socio-sexual re-programming. For this,



he draws on mythic exemplars both as propagandistic encouragement as well as a basis of philosophical reasoning. While these are “mythical” to contemporary thought, in Plato’s time they would have been regarded as perhaps exotic or, in some sense, fabulous (in keeping with the concept of *mythos* as a story) but not necessarily fictitious. Plato’s reformation of women appears to have required some recourse to the fabulous. Their masculinisation, as it may be called, in Magnesia is perhaps most evident in terms of their involvement in the military. It may also be observed in their somewhat limited, though significantly present, role in city politics. If Magnesians women lived in a manner such as Lakonian women or, that is to say, the way that the Athenian Stranger seems to think that Spartan women lived, then they could learn both gymnastics and wool-working but, as he says:

“They would not partake of warlike things, so they would not be able, if at some point fate should compel them, to fight for the sake of their city and their children; nor would they be able to shoot arrows, like certain Amazons, nor could they be acquainted with the skill of any other missile, or to take up spear and shield in imitation of the goddess, so as to nobly oppose the ravaging of their fatherland – nor indeed could they produce fear in the enemy, if nothing more, by being seen arrayed in martial order. Living in such a way, they would not dare to imitate the Sauromatians, whose women would seem like men compared to these.”

This recourse to *mythos*, like many others employed throughout the *Laws*, serves to induce citizens, as Brisson says,

“...to obey the rules that govern the moral conduct of each human being, as well as...life within the city-state.”

His recourse to negative examples here is clearly an instance of litotes that is designed to emphasise the shamefulness associated with the lack of these qualities. Magnesians women, as we have seen, will have the opportunity to become well versed in the arts of war and fighting. The Athenian Stranger has decided not to precisely replicate any of the customs, mentioned in the passage above, in formulating a role for female Magnesians. Rather, he borrows something from each of them in order to achieve a synthesis of sexual characteristics that he deems desirable for women of the second-best *polis*. Repeated references are made here and elsewhere to the models of the Amazons, Spartans and Sauromatians. His choice of exotic imagery reveals a complex network of relationships being synthesised in the final product.

The concept of Sauromatian women, a key example cited by Plato's narrator in support of military training for female Magnesians, would have evoked in his audience at the time an immediate association with the *other*, less 'civilised' peoples of the world and their apparently 'topsy-turvy' modes of existence. Sauromatia, the Athenian Stranger says, is a culture in which women are instructed to handle horses, the bow and other weapons on equal terms with men. This was a tale that his contemporaries would instantly recognise. According to Herodotos, the Sauromatians lived east of the Skythians. They were allegedly descended from an intermingling of Skythian men with a band of marauding Amazons who were raiding villages and generally running amok in that region.

According to the story, a group of Greeks had defeated these women in Themiskyra and, whilst captives aboard ship, they successfully overtook and slew their male captors. They knew nothing of the art of sailing, being women, and roamed aimlessly until they reached Lake Maeotis (the Sea of Azov) where they encountered the Skythians. Herodotos' audience had long been fascinated with these warrior women. Characteristic of the relationship between the Greeks and Asians, real or imagined, there was an intense fascination with the Sauromatians and, more especially, the Amazons. This sense of awe was mingled with the usual degree of scorn reserved for foreigners and their ways.

Herodotos' account of the Amazons reveals, as Gould says,

“his open-eyed acknowledgement that human experience is multiform and that the role of women is culturally determined”.

This would seem to be true inasmuch as Herodotos can imagine that foreign cultures differed in remarkable and shocking ways. Amazons are barbarians by Athenian standards but they are still considered Europeans, although situated at the periphery. As Romm says, they

“...dressed, according to the usual Greek depictions of them, in leather clothing that gave them a distinctly Asian appearance”.

These women, imaginary or otherwise, who took up arms like men, stand in stark contrast to the vast majority of their Greek counterparts.

All versions of the myth contain significant distortions of normal Greek customs. In response to the Amazonian invasion, Herodotos tells us that the Skythians decided to send their youngest men, of *ephēbic* age, amongst the Amazons to live like them and, ideally, to seduce them into marriage. The Amazons eventually agreed to take the young men as husbands – but only on condition that they go and fetch whatever movable property they would inherit from their fathers. This represents one level of an inversion of the ‘normal’ that tends to be present in the *mythos* at large. “So here”, as Hartog indicates,

“it is the husband – not, as is customary, the bride – who brings the dowry”.

In this way, according to Herodotos, was the wild Sauromatian race born. Note the connection between youths of *ephēbic* age and such legalistic phenomena as marriage and inheritance.

Amazons were also a popular *topos* for Athenian art and literature from the 6th century BC onwards. The earliest known Athenian literary reference is probably that at Euripides’ *Herakles* (408-419). They appear on vase paintings from 575 onwards and frequently portray the Amazons in Herakles’ 9th labour as well as Theseus’ famous rape of Hippolyte. In these cases, they are seen as being tamed, ‘normalised’ into accepted modes of behaviour appropriate, in Greek eyes, to their gender. This is a recurring theme in the *mythos* surrounding them. Representations of Amazons had been present in ancient Greek culture at least since the time of Homer and Hesiod and probably earlier. Portrayed from the outset as barbarians, they are abstractly localised in a realm that belies the societal norms of Greek society.

Amazonian images on the Parthenon, as Blundell says,

“...like the other mythical opponents on the metopes, can be seen on one level as an example of the ‘defeated barbarian’ type.”

Their ‘barbarous’ reversal of norms also made them attractive objects of erotic curiosity. They reverse a polarity whose paragon is the adult male hoplite-cum-father and *kyrios*. The psychological implications that their reception appears to have signified with regard to Greek men are complex. It is possible that, as counter-examples, they represent subversive elements present in the classical mindset toward women. Perhaps, as Harrison says,

“[W]e identify a handful of heroines [in Herodotos and elsewhere], Medea, Artemisia, Antigone, and see them as evidence that Greek women envisaged the possibility of their own emancipation; male stereotypes of women show their fear of the opposite sex, their (unconscious) acknowledgement that the oppression of women was wrong, that it could

not ultimately be sustained.”

One suspects that such a vision of sexual egalitarianism was hardly universal, albeit perhaps present in some individuals.

The Amazons provide revealing insights into the modes of thought on sex at the time. They upset the boundaries that were clearly defined for the public and private spheres in many Greek *poleis* and especially Athens. Amazons attained a peculiar status through the negation of traditional norms. “Imagining an inversion of roles”, as Hartog writes,

“meant transferring women from the sphere of marriage into that of war and excluding men from the latter.”

This point perhaps underscores an intrinsically masculine fear. Strabo (63/64 BC – circa 24 AD) indicates that the Amazons would engage in physical relations with men from a neighbouring people, the Gargarians, once a year in order to ‘top up’ their female population. In contrast, Diodorus’ version (1st century BC) says that they did marry but that their menfolk meekly performed that which would have traditionally been ‘women’s work’. Both of these later sources may have been influenced by Plato and were certainly influenced by other, older, Greek traditions on the Amazons of which they partook.

Another inversion of Athenian norms may be seen in Diodorus’ account of the Amazons. He says that they remained virgins whilst pursuing their military activities but ceased to fight when married. Thereafter they become magistrates and undertook Amazonian civic affairs. War then, according to this particular representation, is the business of virgin-Amazons, perhaps paralleling the mythical image of the virgin goddess Athena. These constitute an age-group that experienced a period of *ephēbeia*, comparable to the male equivalent and likewise brought to its *terminus* by marriage. Thus we return to Plato and his hypothetical *ephēbeia* in the *Laws*. Diodorus’ description bears more than a passing resemblance to the Athenian Stranger’s plan for Magnesia’s female citizens. It is not a complete reversal of norms, as in the case of fictionalised Amazonian culture at large – male Magnesians also undergo this training and do not undertake ‘women’s work’ – but the inclusion of women in traditionally male roles is quite remarkable. Female Magnesians must adopt a ‘masculine’, decidedly Amazonian attitude toward their own sexuality in terms of *sophrōsyne* and mastery of their desires. This sort of reversal is not considered ‘unnatural’ but more like an upgrade from excessively emotional femininity to rational masculinity. They are less ‘liberated’ than the average Amazon or Sauromatian and they are still limited by their role as mothers but less so than their Athenian equivalents.

A template for sexual inclusion

It is no accident that the second-best city will be placed on Crete and nowhere near Athens. Although it clearly draws upon a number of Greek traditions, and

particularly Athenian ones, Magnesia is ultimately an alien *polis* with definitively foreign customs – some of which border on the mythical. Plato's Magnesian *ephēbeia* would have been revolutionary *per se* if it had only included men. The fact that women may also choose to partake of it is even more extraordinary. In proposing such a radical revision of normative Greek society, Plato has drawn together a number of cultural influences spanning actual societies, such as Sparta, and extraordinarily exotic ones such as the Amazons. The synthesis of these is ultimately alien to the Greeks of Plato's era, though derived in no small part out of their own mythical traditions.

Recourse to mythology, in particular, resonates with Athenian views on women and 'barbarians' as the *other*; yet it also reveals a desire to embrace that *otherness*, perhaps subconsciously, in ways that would have been anathema to the average Athenian of his time. Perhaps Plato is merely expressing the repressed desires of his fellow Hellenes, desires that manifest in the numerous *mythoi* concerning warrior women along with their physical immortalisation in such monumental architecture as the Parthenon, itself a temple dedicated to the virgin, warrior goddess Athene. The Athenian Stranger's plans are in many respects the purely utilitarian result of both the necessity to encourage *arête* in all the subjects of Magnesia as well as a consequence of Plato's philosophical position to the effect that female souls are in some sense equal (or nearly equal) to their male counterparts. The Amazons provide a ready model for the transition towards a more sexually inclusive social order. The Magnesian *ephēbeia* clearly has had a profound historical impact that deserves greater study and reflection. ■

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